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A twist on the laws of discourse

By Jim Taylor

When I was in school, we learned certain invariable laws of the universe. The Law of Conservation of Matter and Energy, for example. Most of those “laws” assumed a universe that operated like well-oiled gears meshing mechanically. They couldn’t envision a universe composed of indefinable fragments of energy like quarks, photons, and bosons.

We were also capable of getting the laws wrong. For instance, I recall Newton’s First Law of Motion as “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” It’s actually Newton’s Third Law. Engineering friends at university invented their own Second Law: “You can’t push a rope.”

Other laws have appeared over the years. Perhaps you remember Parkinson’s Law, that work expands to fill the time available. Or Murphy’s Law: “Anything that can go wrong, will.” And it will choose the worst possible time to do it.

I once took a writing course from Raymond Hull, co-author of *The Peter Principle* – which states that people in organizations get promoted to their level of incompetence.

Just recently, I became aware of a law I hadn’t heard about before. Godwin’s Law (first formulated in 1990) states that, “As any online discussion grows longer [and I would add, more heated], the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches certainty.”

Or as Wikipedia explains, “given enough time, in *any* online discussion — regardless of topic or scope — someone inevitably makes a comparison to Hitler or the Nazis.”

Last resort

Obviously, Wikipedia adds, Godwin’s Law would not apply if the discussion were actually about Hitler and the Nazis, or about their policies of genocide, eugenics, or racial inferiority

A supplementary notation caught my eye: “The law is sometimes invoked to mark the end of a discussion when a Nazi analogy is made, with the writer who made the analogy being considered to have lost the argument.”

Oh, yes!

I would love to apply that principle to situations where one party quotes an obscure biblical text as final justification for his (or her) point. By resorting to what they consider an unassailable authority, such speakers tacitly acknowledge that all their other arguments have failed.

As with Godwin’s Law, this principle would not apply if the discussion itself were about the Bible. Or about Christian or Jewish theology. But it would apply to debates over Buddhism or Hinduism, where the Bible holds no privileged status. Or, for that matter, disputes about evolution or economics, child rearing or climate change.

I don’t understand why one would want to rely on words written at least 1900 years ago, by a writer who could not have even imagined the implications of iPads, space stations, nuclear bombs, and ice hockey, as if that writer’s uninformed opinions should settle the question. Whatever the question is.

That’s like inviting a relic from a civilization that hadn’t yet discovered the concept of zero to teach you binary code.

It would be so satisfying to feel that dragging the Bible into an argument, that is not about the Bible itself, automatically constitutes an admission of defeat!

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YOUR TURN

A few readers disagreed with my analysis of how adults (and children and teenagers) learn.

Allen Edwards, for example, wrote from Australia, "I fear you may have missed the most important aspect of 'education'. I believe 'learning to learn' is the basis of all education. It begins very early in life when our early environment(s) encourage us to learn... or not. Sadly, some children learn very early that trying new things is not met with encouragement nor approval.

"You seem to be suggesting that 'formal' education (schools, colleges, universities...) is where we are taught to 'store things for future use.' That may, to some extent, be true. But the most exciting, and useful, education we ever have is learning how to learn. Education which encourages exploration of learning, develops methods of enquiry and revels in discovery is probably the most valuable gift any of us can have.

"Many of the modern 'tools of enquiry', such as the Internet, encourage enquiry, following 'leads' and learning further tools for discovery. If classroom teaching doesn't encourage such exploration, it is letting students down. The best teachers I can remember are those who encouraged me to explore, to love reading, to try, to be open to life and learning. And if I came up with unsatisfactory answers, I soon learned how to find better ones! Wasn't it Socrates who used to present ethical/moral dilemmas to his students, encouraging them to learn how to solve the dilemmas by pushing the boundaries of their own reasoning? Lawrence Kohlberg suggested a series of 'levels' of moral reasoning: one 'progresses' to the next 'level' when our current level of reasoning cannot solve the particular moral problem and we need to dig deeper and discover a better approach.

"Now in my 70s, I enjoy watching and listening to my grandchildren learning to love learning. They are not always right, but they are learning where better answers can be found, or worked out.

"Isn't life-learning fun? Perhaps not always, but we can soon learn ways of coping with the more difficult bits... IF we have learned how to learn."

Similarly, Sally Stoddard commented, "I have to disagree. Being an adult learner in a formal educational setting (i.e., university) from age 43 to 54, I have to say my experience does not match up with your statements. I found learning at an older age to be exhilarating. Yes, I took a risk to do so, but I found I was a much better learner than I had been at age 18 -- and I was pursuing knowledge that I knew nothing of at that earlier age. I never feared appearing ignorant. Undoubtedly this was due to the fact that I had learned so much 'just living' that I automatically knew more than the younger students studying with me."

Charles Hill took a different tack: "There is a bell-shaped curve for verbal intelligence, and most non-vocational learning opportunities are verbal. Many people are simply not capable of verbal abstractions; things have to be black and white and tangible. Many segments of society will socially punish any new learning -- Jesus walking on water is a prime example. Most learning is motivated by acquisition. I've been in education (First Grade through Graduate School) for 54 years. I've never had a student motivated by the pure desire to learn."

Freida Stewart wrote, "Adult Education has been the greatest idea any government ever invented. One of life's biggest mysteries to me is why everyone would not take advantage of learning about anything that is of interest to them. I was a late starter in getting schooling finished due to the need to earn my own living, but my experiences in

finishing high school were excellent. There was a pupil-teacher relationship that was totally different than regular schooling. We could for instance question a teacher's statement without fear of a dressing down. Adult Ed. teachers did not pretend to know it all, they used our class time as a swap of ideas. At U. of Sask it was the same. I could easily have become a professional student just for the joy of learning whatever I thought I wanted to learn. Adult class mates seemed to be there for only one reason and we all accepted each other's knowledge. Now Google is my best friend and I don't have to go out to a class room."

Others found my breakdown of learning styles informative. Doreen Beaton commented, "This explains the resistance to change in the church!"

And Ralph Milton asked, "Do you recall a hundred years or so ago, we did a survey about why people didn't do Bible Study? It was because they didn't know anything about the Bible. In other words, they didn't want to look stupid."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalm 79 is for all victims of mindless violence.

- 1 They didn't have to do this, God.
The broken glass, the spray paint, the upholstery slashed, the tables turned upside down.
- 2 They even killed the canary.
Do they call this fun?
- 3 They dumped the contents of the cabinets on the floor, and flung our precious books against the walls.
There is no way we can clean up this mess.
- 4 Do they really hate us this much?
What did we do to offend them?
- 5 If they need someone to vent their anger on, why not dump on those who deserve it?
- 6 Let them lash out at economic systems that protect money and penalize jobs;
at competition that grabs from the weak and gives to the strong;
at governments who sell their countries to balance their budgets.
- 8 How can they hold us accountable for the attitudes of our grandparents?
- 9 Merciful God, give us the courage to carry on.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca

- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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